

Air Diplomacy

Protecting American National Interests

An American withdrawal from Iraq underway, significant troop reductions in Afghanistan planned for 2011, and the defense budget to begin declining next year—all of these scenarios demand vigorous debate over the future of American engagement in the world. As the Obama administration looks to move away from dependence on hard power, the US Air Force has an opportunity to become a vital diplomatic tool through air diplomacy.

Air diplomacy is a proactive approach to preventing conflict by employing airpower in nonkinetic operations as an instrument of national power. It can be critical in supporting US foreign policy in the years to come. For the Air Force to remain relevant in a dynamic international environment, it must turn away from using an ad hoc and often disparate approach and move toward conducting deliberate diplomatic missions aimed at conflict prevention. The service needs a strategy to guide its diplomatic contribution to national objectives, consolidate its diplomatic missions, and maximize the utility of air diplomacy. After developing the air diplomacy concept, the Air Force should then promote it as a cost-effective alternative to the reactive use of hard power. Air diplomacy can also reduce a large overseas presence while maintaining relationships built over more than half a century.

For air diplomacy to play a leading role in American foreign policy requires a discussion of its strengths and weaknesses. Four questions come to mind: (1) How does the US Air Force conduct air diplomacy? (2) Why is air diplomacy increasingly important? (3) Where does air diplomacy fit on the diplomatic spectrum? and (4) What are the ends, ways, and means of an air diplomacy strategy?

How Does the US Air Force Conduct Air Diplomacy?

The US Air Force has an illustrious history of conducting public, humanitarian, military, commercial, traditional, preventive, coercive, and deterrence diplomacy. Dating to the earliest days of aviation, decision makers have employed airpower for diplomatic purposes—and that practice is unlikely to change. Thus, presenting air diplomacy as an option

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to policymakers bodes well for the Air Force in the future as it seeks to play a part in the success of American foreign policy. Some past examples of the diplomatic use of airpower illustrate the breadth of the Air Force's contribution to furthering the national interest.

Air Diplomacy: Public

When aviation enthusiasts within the Army first attempted to convince its leaders, the Congress, and the American people that aviation deserved their support, they undertook a large-scale public diplomacy campaign. In perhaps the earliest example of air diplomacy, members of the fledgling Aviation Section sent its small fleet of aircraft on a successful cross-country tour in 1910, eventually leading to widespread support for military aviation. Throughout the first three decades of its existence, the Army's Aviation Section (1914–18), Air Service (1918–26), and Air Corps (1926–41) became adept at conducting diplomacy at home, as leading aviators such as Brig Gen William “Billy” Mitchell and Maj Gen Mason Patrick worked tirelessly to increase the budget and prestige of military aviation.

Well before the establishment of an independent air force, the Army Air Corps conducted what may well have been the first overseas air diplomacy mission. In an effort to showcase the new B-17, demonstrate American power, and counterbalance growing German and Italian influence in Latin America, six B-17s under the command of Lt Col Robert Olds flew a public diplomacy mission to Buenos Aires for the inauguration of Pres. Roberto Ortiz in February 1938. This mission established an engagement between the US Air Force and Latin American air forces that continues today. Other such missions include regularly participating in international air shows, hosting international conferences, transporting foreign dignitaries and media aboard Air Force aircraft, and regularly conducting “show the flag” flights to foreign locales. Perhaps the 89th Airlift Wing carries out the most well-known US Air Force public diplomacy mission by flying Air Force One, certainly one of the most widely recognized symbols of the United States in the world.

Air Diplomacy: Humanitarian

Humanitarian diplomacy is a particular specialty of the US Air Force because of the speed with which it can respond to a crisis. For example, during the Berlin airlift (24 June 1948–12 May 1949)—perhaps the best-known relief operation in American history—the Air Force provided vital

food, water, and fuel to the people of West Berlin. Initially led by United States Air Forces in Europe, the operation included Airmen from the United States, Britain, and the Commonwealth, who supplied Berlin with more than enough necessities for survival. Operation Vittles managed to deliver 13,000 tons of fuel and provisions per day. A resounding success, the Berlin airlift highlighted the ability of the Allies to provide humanitarian assistance on a massive scale while avoiding a conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union.

More recent examples of US Air Force participation in humanitarian diplomacy include Operations Provide Hope (1992–94) in the former Soviet Union, Provide Promise (1992–96) in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Support Hope (1994) in Rwanda. After a 7.9-magnitude earthquake struck a remote region of Sichuan Province, China, on 12 May 2008, two US Air Force C-17s deployed from Hickam AFB, Hawaii, and Elmendorf AFB, Alaska, with desperately needed relief supplies, arriving on 18 May. Joint Task Force Port Opening is assisting with relief to victims of the 2010 Haitian earthquake. Because of its ability to deploy rapidly to locations around the world, the Air Force is undoubtedly the United States' best tool for providing immediate assistance. These relatively low-cost diplomatic missions build goodwill with governments and citizens around the globe.

Air Diplomacy: Military, Commercial, and Traditional

In recent years, the Departments of Defense and the Air Force have formulated plans for conducting a combination of military, commercial, and traditional diplomacy—*Building Partnership Capacity: QDR Execution Roadmap* (2006) and *United States Air Force Global Partnership Strategy* (2008), respectively. However, current efforts are not the first for the Air Force. During World War II, the Army Air Forces equipped Britain and the Allies with a number of aircraft and supplies under the auspices of the Lend-Lease Program (1941–1945).

Current efforts often fall within the “train, advise, and equip” realm of military diplomacy. Although the sale of weapons systems to foreign governments—through an embassy’s office of defense cooperation—often receives the most attention, commercial diplomacy is limited in scope. Traditionally, the US Air Force directs most of its effort toward training and assisting foreign air forces, as through the Inter-American Air Forces Academy (IAAFA) at Lackland AFB, Texas. By offering Latin American officers and enlisted members a range of training courses in their native

language, the IAAFA assists in creating professional air forces in the region, strengthening ties between the United States and Latin America, and building relationships with future Latin American leaders. Officers who attend the IAAFA may also receive additional US professional military education, giving the best officers a stronger grounding in the skills necessary to lead a professional air force, one capable of operating jointly with the US Air Force. These officers also find themselves more adept at correctly reading the many cultural and linguistic nuances of US diplomatic signals.

Air Diplomacy: Preventive

During Operations Provide Comfort and Northern Watch (1991–2003), the Air Force conducted preventive diplomacy by protecting Kurds in northern Iraq from Saddam Hussein's depredations and was an overwhelming success. Similarly, in Operation Southern Watch (1992–2003), it denied Saddam's regime the use of airspace south of the 33rd parallel in an effort to protect the Shia from further atrocities. Although not completely successful in this regard, it did prevent the Iraqi air force from using airpower in the south.

Air Diplomacy: Coercive

When incentive-based diplomacy cannot fulfill American objectives, the nation often calls upon the Air Force to conduct coercive diplomacy, which can sometimes straddle the line between diplomacy and force. Operations such as El Dorado Canyon (1986), Deliberate Force (1995), and Allied Force (1999) are examples of airpower serving both purposes. During the Cuban missile crisis (1962), however, the Air Force conducted coercive diplomacy that did not blur the line between diplomacy and force. Soon after the crisis began in mid October, Strategic Air Command (SAC) deployed a large number of its nuclear-armed bombers to Florida and the southeastern United States. At Florida Air Force bases such as Homestead, MacDill, and McCoy, B-47s sat wingtip to wingtip, waiting to drop their nuclear payloads on Cuba. Aware of SAC's redeployment of nuclear bombers, among other efforts, the Soviet leadership backed down.

Air Diplomacy: Deterrence

For more than 60 years, nuclear deterrence has played a central role in shaping the composition and culture of the Air Force. By maintaining a fleet of nuclear-capable bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles—

along with the US Navy's submarine-launched ballistic missiles—the United States has successfully deterred nation states from attacking the American homeland with conventional or nuclear weapons. Additionally, conflicts that may have otherwise escalated were kept in check by the fear that limited war could become nuclear. Undoubtedly, the nuclear arsenal is a key tool of American diplomacy.

Why Is Air Diplomacy Increasingly Important?

Air diplomacy is likely to become an increasingly important capability of the US Air Force in the years ahead for three principal reasons. First, entitlement spending will continue to consume a larger portion of the federal budget. Second, the service is unlikely to receive the acquisition dollars required to maintain its current, hard-power capabilities. Third, airpower is less resource intensive and can respond to a changing security environment with a level of speed and flexibility unmatched elsewhere.

“Guns versus Butter”

Increasing entitlement demands will soon force defense spending to decline. As baby boomers retire and an increasing number of able-bodied Americans come to depend on the government for basic necessities, pressure will mount on Congress and the president to increase entitlement spending. This problem is presenting itself sooner than expected. For example, despite predictions of Social Security's insolvency no sooner than 2016, the Social Security Administration's chief actuary recently announced that entitlement outlays will exceed payroll taxes in 2010. An unprecedented one in six Americans depends upon the government for some or all basic necessities. If economic indicators are correct, discretionary spending (e.g., defense spending) will decline, as a percentage of the federal budget, at an accelerated rate that exceeds the decline of the past half century. Air diplomacy may prove an effective approach to partially addressing and preventing the adverse impact of a declining defense budget.

Projected spending will increase steeply for just three entitlement programs: Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid (fig. 1). Projections indicate that the recently passed health care reform bill (H.R. 4872) will add \$1 trillion dollars of entitlement spending over the coming decade—likely a low estimate.

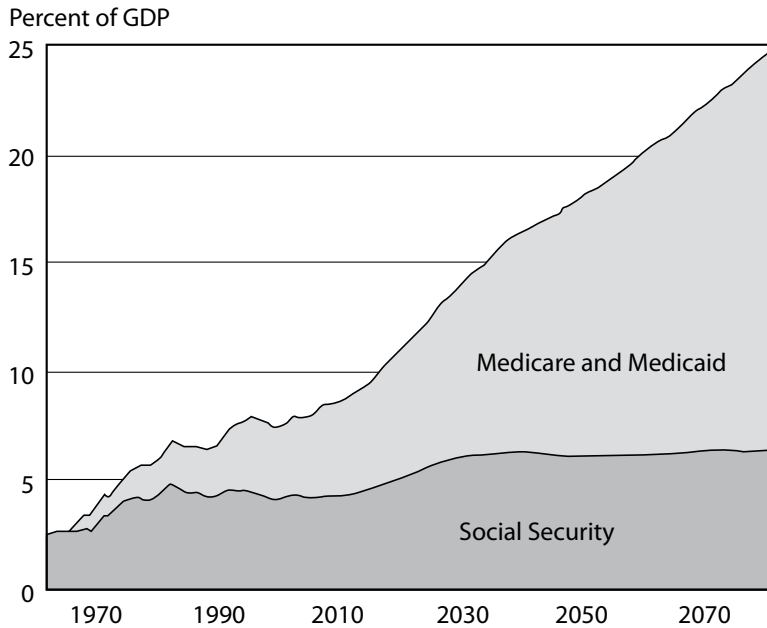


Figure 1. Long-run federal spending on Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, CY 1962–2082 (extended baseline)

Source: Congressional Budget Office, *Long-Term Budget Outlook* (Washington: Congressional Budget Office, December 2007), table 1.1.

Thus, one may reasonably suggest that the future of defense spending in the United States *may* soon resemble that of Europe, where most North Atlantic Treaty Organization members struggle to meet the 2 percent of GDP minimum requirement for defense spending. The federal government cannot spend more than it generates in revenue indefinitely. And, as scholarship suggests, there is an inverse relationship between tax rates and economic growth.

Because air diplomacy is less resource and manpower intensive—on average—than the use of hard power, it presents an attractive option for a fiscally constrained military and political leadership. It also enables greater flexibility in its conduct. During flush economic times, air diplomacy can easily expand, while during an economic downturn, air diplomacy missions can be reduced. The sunk costs of overseas bases and the need to win ongoing conflicts do not allow such flexibility. For example, the average annual cost of maintaining a single Soldier in Afghanistan is \$500,000. At an annual cost of \$30 billion, the Afghanistan war is far more expensive than any air diplomacy alternative. Focusing on conflict prevention through strong diplomatic efforts presents an opportunity to preserve limited resources for circumstances that demand hard power. Air diplomacy offers a proactive

approach to this problem by employing airpower for the purpose of building and strengthening partnerships with current and prospective allies while preventing conflicts.

Acquisition Armageddon

An examination of prospective defense spending presents some serious difficulties for acquisition programs. Forecasts of slowing economic growth and declining defense spending suggest that future Air Force budgets will also decline. Thus, they are unlikely to include sufficient acquisition funding to replace aging platforms. Arguably, this deficit will make it difficult for the Air Force to maintain current combat capabilities, even as next-generation systems enter service. The potential for a decline in hard power is exacerbated by three problems. First, rapidly increasing per-aircraft procurement costs make the fiscal cost of replacing current *capabilities* unsustainable. Although next-generation platforms are more capable, quantity has a quality all its own. Second, acquisition budgets may also face pressure from increasing personnel costs, which Secretary Gates recently addressed. The cost of each service member is increasing at an alarming rate. Third, maintaining aging platforms, as Congress is mandating, places a greater burden on the Air Force's operations and maintenance (O&M) budget. Thus, conflict prevention—the focus of air diplomacy—becomes ever more important, as it offers a way to defend national interests at a lower cost.

A decline in defense spending is likely, based on President Obama's budget submissions (fig. 2).

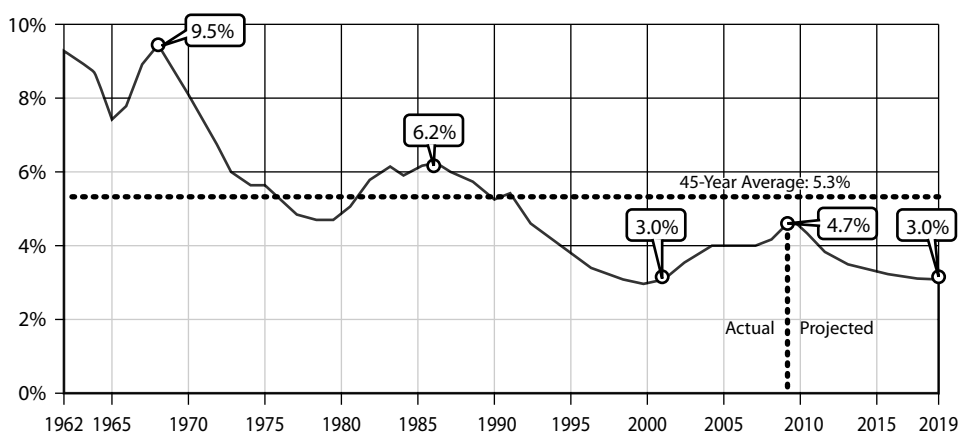


Figure 2. Defense spending as a percentage of gross domestic product

Source: Heritage Foundation, "Obama's Budget Would Reduce National Defense Spending," <http://www.heritage.org/BudgetChartbook/obama-budget-defense-spending>.

A reduction in defense spending from 4.5 to 3.0 percent of the gross domestic product will present difficulty for every service. The “procurement holiday” of the 1990s plus 20 years of elevated aircraft utilization rates—Operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm (1990–91), Northern Watch (1992–2003), Southern Watch (1992–2003), Joint Endeavor (1995–96), Allied Force (1999), Enduring Freedom (2001–present), and Iraqi Freedom (2003–present)—have exacerbated the problem. Combining the effects of declining budgets and the need to replace worn-out aircraft easily illustrates how these issues can prove particularly difficult for the Air Force. This problem is occurring just as the service is attempting to develop and field several new airframes. Moreover, a sense of the Congress suggests that it will not allocate funds needed by the Air Force to meet projected acquisition requirements. Even if next-generation aircraft are more capable than those they replace, combat capability will likely decline.

Speed, Flexibility, and Limited Footprint

Air diplomacy is likely to become more important because of the speed, flexibility, and limited footprint of airpower. The US Army’s dominance in military decision making during America’s involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq over the past decade has left the nation focused on the use of hard power. The ground-centric nature of these two conflicts provided the leverage needed by the Army to reassert itself after a long period of perceived subservience to the Air Force. As the president looks for an alternative to current strategy, air diplomacy will seem an attractive choice.

Simply stated, air diplomacy is an effective way of defending vital national interests, building necessary partnerships, preventing conflict, and expanding American influence without creating the anti-American sentiment that often accompanies thousands of boots on the ground. Practicing air diplomacy deliberately and coherently has greater potential to effectively leverage the capabilities of the Air Force in the interests of the nation than the current approach.

One obvious point argues against further development of air diplomacy as an Air Force capability, however—the contention that it does not fall within the service’s core mission. On the contrary, air diplomacy is a more complete conceptualization of “building partnerships,” currently one of 12 Air Force core functions. As currently understood, building partner-

ships fails to encompass many Air Force missions that would fall within air diplomacy. Every service builds partnerships, but only the Air Force conducts air diplomacy.

Although the Air Force prepares—in peacetime—to fight the nation's wars, preventing war is equally desirable. Air diplomacy is a primary contributor to that mission.

Where Does Air Diplomacy Fit on the Diplomatic Spectrum?

Generally associated with peaceful relations between states, diplomacy nevertheless comes in many forms. States use diplomacy to promote economic interests (trade), protect citizens abroad, propagate culture and ideology, enhance national prestige, promote friendship, and isolate adversaries. Moreover, diplomacy is certainly a less expensive way to exercise power in international affairs. Diplomacy is one of two primary elements of foreign policy, the other being war. Both diplomacy and war are means to an end rather than ends in themselves.

Dividing diplomacy into two broad groups—incentive-based and threat-based—may offer additional clarity. On the one hand, incentive-based diplomacy does not rely on the threat of force for success. Rather, it succeeds when states engaged in diplomatic negotiations reach a mutually beneficial agreement. On the other hand, threat-based diplomacy relies on coercive means, such as the threat of force or sanctions. For the United States, the use of incentive-based diplomacy is likely to increase as the Obama administration may well signal a clear shift away from the use of hard power. This policy will give the US Air Force an opportunity to play a greater role in the conduct of soft power or, more specifically, incentive-based diplomacy.

Diplomatic theory and practice suggest that states typically conduct 13 types of diplomacy, each differentiated by the means employed and the ends sought. Although the types of diplomacy vary to a significant degree, their methods and objectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A description of each type of diplomacy clarifies corresponding examples of air diplomacy.

Incentive-Based Diplomacy

Traditional diplomacy relies on a professional diplomatic corps that applies intelligence and tact to the conduct of official relations between the governments of independent states. *Commercial diplomacy* focuses on securing trade agreements that promote the economic interests of individuals, corporations, and industries (public or private) believed to support national interests. It is designed to influence the policies of foreign governments with respect to regulatory decisions, foreign direct investment, and trade. *Conference diplomacy*, dating back to the Concert of Europe, is most widely known for its reliance on international committees such as the United Nations. *Public diplomacy*, according to Amb. Christopher Ross, “articulate[s] U.S. policy clearly in as many media and languages as are necessary to ensure that the message is received.” *Preventive diplomacy*, coined by Dag Hammarskjöld in the introduction to the *15th Annual Report* (1960) of the UN General Assembly, seeks to deescalate tensions by negotiating a resolution to grievances through an impartial arbiter. *Resource diplomacy* emphasizes the acquisition of four vital interests: food, energy, water, and minerals. *Humanitarian diplomacy*, developed in the aftermath of World War II, is often designed to aid at-risk populations after a natural or manmade disaster by providing food, shelter, clothing, and security. *Protective diplomacy* aims to provide physical protection to citizens abroad or to groups of civilians (ethnic or religious minorities, tribal groups, etc.) that may face persecution or find themselves in harm’s way.

Threat-Based Diplomacy

Totalitarian diplomacy is marked by its forceful, inflexible, and seemingly irrational nature—propaganda and deception serving as two primary tools of conduct. As the example of North Korea illustrates, totalitarian diplomacy can often take the form of threats to members of the international community or to stability within the international system. According to James Willard, *military diplomacy* is “the conduct by military diplomats of negotiations and other relations between nations, nations’ militaries, and nations’ citizens aimed at influencing the environment in which the military operates.” *Coercive diplomacy* applies the threat of violence in a manner and magnitude sufficient to persuade an opponent to cease aggression without requiring the actual use of violence.

Anne Sartori best describes *diplomacy by deterrence* as “the use of a particular subset of language—deterrent threats—to attempt to convey the

information that a state is willing to fight over a disputed issue or issues. Thus, deterrent threats are a form of diplomacy.” Former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice describes *transformational diplomacy* as a multinational effort to build and sustain democracy while developing well-governed and responsible states.

This brief discussion of modern diplomacy places the US Air Force’s specific contributions to the conduct of diplomacy in the proper context. In reality, airpower is a dual-use capability equally adept at producing threat-based diplomacy and kinetic effects on the battlefield or preventing conflicts through incentive-based diplomacy.

What Are the Ends, Ways, and Means of an Air Diplomacy Strategy?

Turning the previous conceptual discussion into a viable service strategy is a difficult task. However, if those approximate descriptions of the future fiscal, political, and security environment are correct, then developing an air diplomacy strategy is worth the effort. Examining its development in terms of ends, ways, and means offers a useful framework.

Ends

The ends (objectives) of an air diplomacy strategy should focus on three central tenets. First, the strategy should develop cost-effective approaches to building and maintaining partnerships with current or prospective allies. By doing so, the United States will expand the number of potential partners available for support during a future conflict. Second, the strategy should develop proactive approaches to engaging with current or prospective adversaries (e.g., China, Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela) for the specific purpose of addressing contentious issues without resorting to the use of hard power. Not all adversaries can be persuaded to alter their behavior through diplomacy, but it should always remain a method of first resort. Third, the strategy should consolidate the disparate diplomatic missions conducted across the service. Currently, the Air Force lacks a unifying strategy capable of effectively leveraging a wide array of its missions.

Ways

Ways, or “the methods that the organization uses to achieve those ends,” are perhaps more difficult to develop than are the ends. Although

the following list is not complete, some of the recommendations may prove useful in developing the “ways” of an air diplomacy strategy.

First, incorporating existing strategies, programs, plans, and approaches related to air diplomacy will simplify the process of creating a service strategy. For example, the Air Force’s strategy for building partnerships and the DoD *Report on Strategic Communication* represent a useful starting point for a larger air diplomacy strategy.

Second, it is important to know where air diplomacy begins and ends. Like all other tools for conducting foreign policy, it has strengths and weaknesses. Air diplomacy differs from the Air Force’s destructive capabilities in the same way that soft power differs from hard power. Discussing air diplomacy’s contribution to preventing conflict may provide a sufficient rationale for its use as an alternative to hard power.

Third, an air diplomacy strategy must give clear direction to the service, enabling the chief of staff to carry out his responsibilities for organizing, training, and equipping so the Air Force can present the combatant commander with forces prepared to conduct a range of diplomatic missions. The employment of force (planes and personnel) particularly deserves consideration in an air diplomacy strategy. Adapting the air and space expeditionary force construct may provide an adequate dual-use capability with the needed flexibility to fight a major conflict or conduct air diplomacy.

Fourth, the Air Force must actively promote air diplomacy as an alternative approach in foreign policy. A seamless transition from the use of hard power (Afghanistan and Iraq) to soft power (air diplomacy) will have great appeal over the next two years. The Obama administration is looking for a distinct alternative to the present strategy. An approach to foreign policy that demands less American blood and treasure, with a smaller overseas presence, while offering greater flexibility, may well generate a strong attraction in the wake of a major conflict. Air diplomacy has the potential to be that alternative, if properly employed.

Means

The means required to develop an air diplomacy strategy are straightforward. Four components within the Air Force should share principal responsibility for creating a service-wide strategy—with other components also playing an important role. The office of the secretary of the Air Force for international affairs, which has already developed the *United States*

Air Force Global Partnership Strategy and directs a large number of commercial, military, traditional, and public diplomacy missions, is a logical choice to lead the effort. Because Air Mobility Command supplies critical airlift for humanitarian and other diplomatic missions, it deserves a role in the strategy development process. Global Strike Command merits inclusion in the process by virtue of its responsibility for deterrence. Finally, Air Combat Command provides the combat forces required to conduct preventive and coercive diplomacy, so any air diplomacy strategy would be incomplete without its participation.

Conclusion

One criticism the air diplomacy concept is certain to face is that it usurps the State Department's principal role. This is not the intent. In the end, the wide range of missions regularly performed by Airmen makes airpower an attractive option for building partnerships, assuring allies, and dissuading enemies. Leveraging existing capabilities by developing an air diplomacy strategy that can, for example, serve as part of a post-Afghanistan/Iraq War foreign policy is in the best interest of the nation and the Air Force. With defense spending likely to decline, the service must innovate or face becoming irrelevant. The Air Force is uniquely positioned to offer the president a clear course through what are likely to be turbulent skies.

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